

CHARLES HOMER HASKINS  
PRIZE LECTURE FOR 2019

*A Life of Learning*  
**Lynn Hunt**

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## ON CHARLES HOMER HASKINS

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Charles Homer Haskins (1870–1937), for whom the ACLS lecture series is named, organized the founding of the American Council of Learned Societies in 1919 and served as its first chairman from 1920 to 1926. He received a PhD in history from Johns Hopkins University at the age of 20. Appointed an instructor at the University of Wisconsin, Haskins became a full professor in two years. After 12 years there, he moved to Harvard University, where he served as dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences from 1908 to 1924. At the time of his retirement in 1931, he was the Henry Charles Lea Professor of Medieval History. A close advisor to President Woodrow Wilson (whom he had met at Johns Hopkins), Haskins attended the Paris Peace Conference of 1919 as chief of the Division of Western Europe of the American Commission to Negotiate Peace. He served as president of the American Historical Association in 1922, and was a founder and the second president of the Medieval Academy of America in 1926–27.

A great American teacher, Haskins also did much to establish the reputation of American scholarship abroad. His distinction was recognized by honorary degrees from Strasbourg, Padua, Manchester, Paris, Louvain, Caen, Harvard, Wisconsin, and Allegheny College, where in 1883 he had begun his higher education at the age of 13.

## HASKINS PRIZE LECTURERS

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2019	Lynn Hunt
2018	Sally Falk Moore
2017	Harry G. Frankfurt
2016	Cynthia Enloe
2015	Wendy Doniger
2014	Bruno Nettl
2013	Robert Alter
2012	Joyce Appleby
2011	Henry Glassie
2010	Nancy Siraisi
2009	William Labov
2008	Theodor Meron
2007	Linda Nochlin
2006	Martin E. Marty
2005	Gerda Lerner
2004	Peter Gay
2003	Peter Brown
2002	Henry A. Millon
2001	Helen Vendler
2000	Geoffrey Hartman
1999	Clifford Geertz
1998	Yi-Fu Tuan
1997	Natalie Zemon Davis
1996	Robert William Fogel
1995	Phyllis Pray Bober
1994	Robert K. Merton
1993	Annemarie Schimmel
1992	Donald W. Meinig
1991	Milton Babbitt
1990	Paul Oskar Kristeller
1989	Judith N. Shklar
1988	John Hope Franklin
1987	Carl E. Schorske
1986	Milton V. Anastos
1985	Lawrence Stone
1984	Mary Rosamond Haas
1983	Maynard Mack

## ON LYNN HUNT

Lynn Hunt is Distinguished Research Professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. She has her BA from Carleton College and her MA and PhD from Stanford University.

Hunt's most recent books are a co-authored textbook, *The French Revolution and Napoleon: Crucible of the Modern World* (2017), and *History: Why It Matters* (2018). She has written on the origins of human rights in the eighteenth century, *Inventing Human Rights* (2007); the question of time and history writing, *Measuring Time: Making History* (2008); early 18th century views of the world's religions, *The Book that Changed Europe* (with M. Jacob and W. Mijnhardt, 2010); and *Writing History in the Global Era* (2014). Her abiding focus has been the French Revolution: *Revolution and Urban Politics in Provincial France* (1978), *Politics, Culture, and Class in the French Revolution* (1984), and *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* (1992).

She has written about historical method and epistemology in *The New Cultural History* (1989); with Joyce Appleby and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (1994); with Jacques Revel, *Histories: French Constructions of the Past* (1995); and with Victoria Bonnell, *Beyond the Cultural Turn* (1999). She has edited collections on the history of eroticism and pornography, and coauthored a Western civilization textbook, *The Making of the West: Peoples and Cultures* (2000, 6th ed. 2019). Her books have been translated into 14 languages.

Hunt was president of the American Historical Association in 2002. She served on the Board of Directors of the American Council of Learned Societies from 2005–9. She was named a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, a Member of the American Philosophical Society, and a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

## INTRODUCTION

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Professor Lynn Hunts's 2019 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture is the 37th in an annual series named for the first chairman of the American Council of Learned Societies. The Executive Committee of the Delegates of ACLS selects the prize winner and lecturer from the many worthy nominations put forward by our community. Haskins lecturers are asked "to reflect on a lifetime of work as a scholar, on the motives, the chance determinations, the satisfactions (and the dissatisfactions) of the life of learning; and to explore through one's own life the larger, institutional life of scholarship. We do not wish the speaker to present the products of one's own scholarly research, but rather to share with other scholars the personal process of a particular lifetime of learning."

Lynn Hunt is the author, coauthor, or editor of hundreds of articles and reviews and more than two dozen books, which have been the subject of many scholarly forums and have been translated into 14 languages. Much of her work—from her first book to more recent publications—has focused on the French Revolution, whose societal underpinnings, motivations, and global ramifications she has explored through innovative, boundary-crossing approaches. Reading deeply into culture to seek out what prepares the ground for historical change, she has done pioneering work that examines how gender and cultural structures redefine the lives of people who carry on through and after such change. Using Freud as a means of asking questions that connect the ordinariness of daily life to the extraordinary actions of revolution, she noted in 1992, for example, that "politics do depend on imagination and hence to some extent on fantasy, and family experience is the source of much of that fantasy." Her scope has also widened to consider broader historiographical issues with both vision and reflection, and even wider to changes in the humanities and higher education as a whole. And now, in her work of the last 15 years, she has made the case ever more strongly for the relevance of history and histori-

cal thinking to the world of today. Shifts in personal attitudes, she has argued, not only seen in literary innovations such as the novel but advanced through such creative forms, can transform how we think about other people in truly consequential ways. In her 2007 book *Inventing Human Rights*, for example, Hunt shows how readers of the novel learned to extend their purview of empathy “across traditional social boundaries. . . . As a consequence, they came to see others—people they did not know personally—as like them. . . . Without this learning process, ‘equality’ could have no deep meaning and in particular no political consequence.”

In *History: Why it Matters*, published last year, Hunt describes why we need the study of history more than ever in a time when political debates about war memorials spark marches, riots, and even murder. Society—amid political shifts, including the renewed growth of autocracy—forgets, or worse, manipulates the power of exploring the realities of the past. Hunt reminds us of the role that historiographical narration of those realities plays in shaping the myths that individuals act upon. Regardless of “all the efforts of past and present authoritarians to manipulate history and control memory,” she asserts, “history and memory have a way of breaking through, thanks in no small measure to the history written and taught by those trained in the discipline.”

There is no finer exemplar of that training than Hunt herself. She has been awarded several major residencies and fellowships, including, of course, from ACLS. Her books have been honored with numerous prizes, and she herself received the American Historical Association’s Nancy Lyman Roelker Mentorship Award, as well as distinguished teaching awards both at Berkeley and at UCLA, where she held the Eugen Weber Chair in Modern European History and now serves as a Distinguished Research Professor.

Her legendary generosity and dedication as a teacher extended from the large undergraduate lecture hall to the graduate seminar room. She’s also been a selfless academic citizen and was

elected president of two ACLS constituent societies: the American Historical Association and the Society for French Historical Studies. I count myself fortunate to have benefited from Lynn's many years of service to ACLS—on the Burkhardt Fellowship selection committee and on our board of directors.

Pauline Yu  
President Emeritus  
American Council of Learned Societies



LYNN HUNT

## *A Life of Learning*

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It is a great honor to be asked to give the ACLS Haskins Prize Lecture, and I am very grateful for this opportunity to think with you about my own particular journey. But it is not just my life of learning, as if it were an entirely individual experience. I would not be standing before you were it not for the vast expansion of higher education after World War II, the political ferments of the 1960s that shaped my college years, the women's movement that took off just as I was entering graduate school, and the gay liberation movement that makes it possible for me to come here today with my partner of 30 years, Margaret Jacob, and not try to hide it. It goes without saying, moreover, that without the support, encouragement, and even the admonitions of my parents, my two sisters, spouse, teachers, friends, and colleagues, I would never have had a life of learning, much less the privileged one that has brought me to this moment.

Since democratization, political upheaval, and the struggles for rights affected my life in such profound ways, it is perhaps not surprising that these have been the main themes of my scholarship. It is less obvious that a girl raised in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with German-speaking maternal grandparents would end up becoming a fervent Francophile who finds in the French Revolution of 1789 ample material for discussing most of the main elements of modernity, from democracy and authoritarianism to pornography and women's rights, not to mention the concepts of

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Note: A video of Professor Hunt delivering the 2019 Charles Homer Haskins Prize Lecture is available in the media collection on the ACLS website, [www.acls.org](http://www.acls.org).

revolution, social science, and modernity itself. These were not just political and social movements or concepts, however. From the very beginning of my studies, I was gripped by the question of the role of individuals: How do individuals produce social change, and why do individuals change their minds, sometimes in very radical fashion? Wanting to make sense of that nexus of individuals and society, I often found myself wandering into other fields, from literature and art history to psychoanalysis and neuroscience. My colleagues in history sometimes found this straying from the discipline confounding, if not infuriating.

Needless to say, the first individual I had in mind was me. As a teenager I spent an inordinate amount of time reading what scholars called the neo-Freudians, especially Erich Fromm and Karen Horney. I was looking for understanding of my own psychological makeup, yet the best clues were lying in plain sight, in our family, which was much like other middle-class families in Saint Paul. It did have some significant peculiarities, however. My parents met, married, and had me and my sister Lee in Panama. My father ended up working in Panama as an electrical engineer after being kicked out of the United States Naval Academy in Annapolis for not obeying orders. My mother graduated at the top of her high school class in Saint Paul in 1942 and immediately signed up to work for the United States Army Corps of Engineers and was sent to the Panama Canal Zone. As a consequence of these displacements, both of my parents spoke Spanish, and after we returned to the United States in 1948, they occasionally hosted visitors from Latin America and South America. Foreign languages did not seem so foreign at our house.

As a family we followed many of the usual middle-class rituals. We had television from early on because my father loved all electrical and electronic gadgets, and every Sunday my maternal grandparents came for dinner and *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Grandpa and Grandma provided a somewhat mysterious link to the Old Country—mysterious because my grandfather spoke English with some difficulty and my grandmother, though born in sparsely populated western Minnesota, grew up speaking German at home. We loved them, but we did not fully grasp



Richard and Ruby Hunt at their wedding in January 1945.

them. We thought my grandfather was Russian, but he was born in the German-speaking part of what is today western Ukraine. He was a blacksmith for the railroad. My grandmother was one of 14 surviving children, and two of her brothers stayed on the family farm near Odessa, Minnesota. Some of my fondest memories from childhood came from the days I spent at that farm when I was 12 and helping my grandmother cook for the harvest, pumping water each morning at daybreak, loading wood into the wood-burning stove, lighting the kerosene lamps (there was no running water or electricity), visiting the corncob cellar that was supposed to provide protection from tornadoes, and even using the exotic—for us—outhouse.

As middle-class children, we were expected to go to college, even though my mother had not, and her parents had never made it past the early grades in school. Our ambitions, such as they were, encountered little in the way of obstacles in those prosperous times for white middle-class Americans. My parents lived comfortably, but they were always mindful of every dollar spent. As the eldest of three daughters, I eagerly subscribed to the academic and athletic aspirations of my father; in his basement



Lynn and her sister Lee with their father Richard on a family trip to Washington DC.

ham radio retreat he taught us all Morse code, which as a navy man he considered essential learning, and he readily explained atomic theory and anything else I wanted to know while at the same time showing me how to throw a softball and a football and, above all, how to play golf, which I played with both my parents until I went to college and realized golf was not cool. My dad was a great athlete, and as someone brought up by a demanding grandfather in Newton, Massachusetts, after his mother died in an accident, he stood out in Minnesota for his charm, diction, and reserve; we adored him.

It was crucial, in all kinds of ways, that my father was considerably older than my mother, though he didn't look it. Those sixteen years' difference meant that he felt unthreatened by my mother's yearning to cut through the netting thrown over wives and mothers in the 1950s. She did all that was expected of her: putting dinner on the table shortly after 5 p.m. every evening,

growing a vegetable garden, and sewing our clothes—as you can see, my mother decided to dress me and Lee as identical twins despite our being two years apart in age. But it was never enough for her, and over the years she steadily climbed an invisible ladder: president of our school’s PTA, president of all of Saint Paul’s PTAs, president of the League of Women Voters, and eventually, once we had mostly grown up, city councilwoman reelected four times and then county commissioner five times as well. With her first name of Ruby, her relatively tall stature, and her utter lack of airs, she seemed a natural campaigner, and she always believed it was her duty to participate and even to lead when others stepped back. My father had to give up his lifelong affiliation to the Republican Party to vote for her.

Even as youngsters we got extensive civics lessons. My mother would explain the difference between a strong and weak mayoral form of government to anyone who would listen, and she took us along to Democratic-Farmer-Labor Party booyahs and sent us around the neighborhood to hand out literature about bond issues and charter amendments. My mother spent hours on the phone preparing for meetings, and conversations about politics frequently filled our living room. It is no wonder, then, that I decided to write my doctoral dissertation on two towns at the beginning of the French Revolution and compared one that experienced a violent revolution with one that did not. Local politics was something I felt I could comprehend, even in places far away and long ago. Subject matter was the least of what I learned from my mother, who, at age 95, is still advising candidates on their campaigns. What most impressed me was her insistence on overcoming fear; she had only a basic education and no experience of speaking in public, yet she learned to present herself as someone ready to lead, whatever the circumstances. Shyness or timidity could never be an excuse for sitting back and keeping silent.

Nothing in my upbringing foretold a university career, and yet nothing forestalled it either. The women and men of my generation went to college as the number of places was beginning to expand, but in days of relative innocence. No one I knew took the SAT more than once or got tutoring or coaching for it.

Like most of my friends, I applied to three or four places, all of them within 40 miles of my home. I went to Carleton College, 40 miles away, because it was a good school and going there would mean not living at home. I had a partial scholarship that included a work study program several hours a week, so I waited tables in the dining halls and cleaned test tubes in the biology lab. I was working in the lab the day Kennedy was assassinated. No one worried about getting a job in the 1960s; for many of us, the main concern was choosing a path—whether the Peace Corps, law school, or graduate school—that would enable us to contribute to changing the world.

For me that had always meant teaching. In junior high school I wanted to become a junior high school teacher. By the time I got to college my sights had shifted upward. I was one of those obnoxious kids who loved everything about school and wanted to be in school, in one way or another, forever. When I was in college, I felt bereft when I went home for vacation. Although I loved my sisters in my way, I missed my friends, the meetings in the library at all hours of the day and night, and the discovery of one new thing after another. College was all about intensity:



First teaching post.

intense relationships, intense classes, intense tennis playing, and above all else, the swelling wave of political issues that roiled my college years of 1963 to 1967. We organized against the college's notion of *in loco parentis*, which meant mandatory chapel, dorms segregated by sex, and strict limits on the hours women could be out at night, not to mention the three-foot rule: when someone of the opposite sex visited your room during the few hours that was permitted, you were meant to keep three feet on the floor. I spent so many hours in Dean Phillips's office arguing with her that she suggested I should go to law school.

And we marched. We marched for civil rights and we marched against the Vietnam War. Even at little Carleton, with its 1,300 students, the marches got attention. We were angry a good part of the time, whether at the so-called establishment, at the college administration, or at our parents, but never that I can remember at the faculty, who were probably, for the most part, on our side. We felt collectively that a veil had been ripped off that was covering our sight, and this made us sympathetic if not downright enthusiastic for all manner of revolutionary movements, past and present. I remember with some chagrin the way I tortured my parents about the virtues of Communist China. My mother was a Eugene McCarthy Democrat who supported civil rights for African Americans and opposed the Vietnam War, but that wasn't radical enough for me at the time.

Yet, in my case, graduate school beckoned even more than Students for a Democratic Society, and I went off to Stanford to study German history because one of my young professors at Carleton had recently finished his PhD at Stanford in German history. I had first studied German for family reasons and only learned French as a requirement for a possible German major. Once I arrived at Stanford, however, I discovered that the famous professor of German history had little time for me, whereas the assistant professor of eighteenth-century French history, Phil Dawson, could be found in his office at just about any time. Since there were no women on the regular faculty of the history department when I arrived, I knew that moral support was going to be important. So I switched from studying the bad revolution—the

Nazi seizure of power—to investigating the good one: the French Revolution of 1789. The way had been prepared by a charismatic teacher of that subject at Carleton: Carl Weiner. We sat entranced as he paced the floor and banged a sword to mark the drama of the arrest and execution of Robespierre, architect of the Terror and a leading revolutionary.

The political turbulence I experienced at Carleton soon paled as Northern California became an epicenter of protests against the draft and the prosecution of the war. Every one of my male friends had to figure out what to do about the increasingly demanding draft: flee to Canada; resist induction; or, more commonly, figure a way out, whether with the help of a friendly family doctor or coming out as a homosexual. The pressure ratcheted up, and Stanford experienced more upheaval in the years of my graduate study than it ever had before or since. The mass meetings on campus, marches on local companies associated with the war effort, boycotts of classes, and many angry confrontations within the history department were only heightened by the news of revolts in Paris, Prague, and many other places. It was the right time to study revolution.

I arrived in Paris in September 1970 having never been to Europe, knowing no one, not having a place to live, and speaking French only haltingly. Sitting in a tiny room in a hotel, where I was molested on arrival by the bellboy on the way up in the elevator, and facing the prospect of the Turkish toilet down the hall when I got food poisoning at a Greek restaurant in the Latin Quarter, I had to review my options. They seemed clear to me: go home to my parents or stick it out. My very first day, after the encounter in the elevator, I walked over to Notre-Dame Cathedral, and in truth, that had immediately sealed the deal. Paris thrilled me in the way that no other place ever had or would.

My situation improved immediately; a friend of a friend invited me for a drink and asked along another American PhD student who happened to be looking for an apartment, too. The

friend of a friend, Marion Bieber, a German-Jewish refugee to London who worked in Paris for the Ford Foundation, was to be a kind of guardian angel for decades to come, and the other student, Chris White, and I hit it off and ended up sharing an apartment that came to me in a serendipitous way. One night, when with friends from Stanford I was looking at a menu of a restaurant near the avenue des Gobelins, a Tunisian man approached us because he heard us talking about Stanford. He knew one of the history professors, and he had a cousin who had an apartment near the Cadet Métro station in the 9th *arrondissement*. It was painted bright orange, had a fabulous couscous pot, and worked well for two graduate students. Chris was doing her dissertation in political science at Cornell on North Vietnamese land reform, and she had been to Paris more times than she could remember. Habib knew everything about North African politics and restaurants. Between the two of them I got a whole new education, not to mention lifelong tastes for Vietnamese and North African foods. Chris and I went to all the anti-war demonstrations in Paris, and she introduced me to an old family friend, Madame Faizy, a retired schoolteacher who discussed French novels and plays with me over long lunches at her apartment. I wasn't just hooked; I was fanatical, despite the constant effort required to make myself understood at the archives, which at the time were not famed for their friendliness.

As is already evident, a path was cleared for me by a combination of encouraging men and unusually aspiring women. At Stanford I gained a deep intellectual education from a woman who never got beyond the status of lecturer: Margot Drekmeier. She had written a pathbreaking dissertation on salons long before the role of women in the Enlightenment got any sustained attention. She was hired at Stanford so that the political science department could attract her husband. Her story was all too typical of the experiences of women before my generation, and it was only after I arrived at Berkeley as an assistant professor in 1974 that signs of change were becoming apparent. Berkeley's history department had gone from one woman in 1970 to four in 1974, in a department of some 55 regular faculty.

That one woman who got things started at Berkeley, Natalie Zemon Davis, immediately became my mentor and friend (she gave the Haskins lecture in 1998). Although she left for Princeton before I even came up for tenure, she has been a model for me through the decades of how to create the best possible environments for learning and discovery. Soon after my arrival in Berkeley, she invited me to dinner at her house with one of the few other senior women in the humanities and social sciences: the art historian Svetlana Alpers. The evening is deeply etched in my mind as we went back and forth about Juliet Mitchell's recent book on psychoanalysis and feminism. Soon I was involved with the intellectually electrifying group that founded the journal *Representations*, and my own trajectory took a sharp turn toward a growing preoccupation with language, symbols, and ritual. I also discovered the terrors and rewards of teaching, finally, after so many years of preparation.

Not only did I benefit from the encouragement of exceptional mentors and truly extraordinary colleagues, but I was also just plain lucky. While still laboriously working my way through my doctoral dissertation, I had managed to be named a Junior Fellow in the newly established University of Michigan Society of Fellows. I finished my dissertation while participating in the lively workshop in Ann Arbor run by Charles and Louise Tilly, pioneers of political sociology and social history. At the same time, in the Society of Fellows I met a host of remarkable Senior and Junior Fellows, who sent me off in many new directions. Among them were John D'Arms, who went on to be a visionary president of the ACLS; the poet and essayist Donald Hall, who read my fledgling efforts at making sense; and the Junior Fellows Richard Ford, then composing his first novel; Gayle Rubin, soon to be a leading queer theorist; and my frequent lunch and pool-playing partner, the classicist Bernie Frischer. After two years in Michigan, Berkeley offered me a position with the promise that after one year of teaching I would go back and finish my third year at Ann Arbor. If that isn't luck, I don't know what is. The freedom I enjoyed to try new paths, not to mention beginning to learn how to write, even while fin-



Lynn at the University of California, Berkeley, in the late 1970s.

ishing what I needed to finish, had an incalculable impact on my future. I was always ahead of the curve.

My luck continued over the years. I had gone into French history when French history as practiced in France reached the zenith of its international influence, and when what was called French theory (otherwise known as post-structuralism or post-modernism) had just begun to make tracks in Anglophone universities. My group at Berkeley included the anthropologist Paul Rabinow, a major interpreter of the French theorist Michel Foucault, and Paul and I set up a French studies exchange program with the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris. When I arrived at the University of Pennsylvania in 1987, seeking new perspectives on an unfamiliar coast, I spent my very first year there attending a seminar organized by Joan Scott at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton on the future of feminism. Among its participants, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway,

and Joan Scott herself would soon transform the field. At Penn, postcolonial studies—that is, attention to the ways Europeans had colonized not only nations but also thought itself—was just gaining traction. Finally, when I returned west to UCLA in 1998, I could not have found a better environment in which to deepen my long-standing interest in visual studies and learn about the burgeoning field of neuroscience. Thanks to Margaret Jacob, I was invited to participate in an unusual seminar of young research psychiatrists who talked about their work—whether it involved people, frogs, or slugs—and also about more general issues such as the decline of psychoanalysis and the rise of pharmacological psychiatry and neuroscience.

This litany of names and places might have made you think of me as a kind of Zelig character who was carried away by the currents of the latest fashions, but I prefer to think of myself as eager to get a handle on how new approaches might fruitfully reorient historical studies and make them even more salient for students. My focus on the eighteenth century and the French Revolution never wavered, even when I wrote about more general issues of method and historical truth, nor did my aims: understanding why people became actively involved, what made people change their views suddenly and radically, or, to put it another way, what enabled people to believe that they had rights. My experiences at the university only intensified the urgency of those questions and, at the same time, spurred the search for novel solutions. When I was promoted to full professor at Berkeley in the mid-1980s, I was the youngest among 41 full professors and, for a time, the only female. Needless to say, I was also the only lesbian. There were two older gay men on the faculty, but they, like many gay faculty, were very secretive about their lives. It followed logically, it seemed to me, that I had to insist that it was unacceptable for the department to be, as it was then, entirely white. The department had hired several women after 1970 but no minorities. My senior colleagues agreed, and that, too, began to alter, reflecting broader transformations in US universities and American life. In 1987, 17 percent of history faculty in the United States were women; only 5 percent were minorities. By 2007

the proportion of women had doubled to 35 percent; minorities reached 15 percent.<sup>1</sup> Those figures tell of outcomes; they cannot convey the day-to-day struggles that took place to make these changes happen, one contested appointment at a time.

Since higher education was undergoing a halting but nonetheless profound transformation, as Jews and then women and minorities began to claim positions—first as students and eventually as faculty—it is not surprising that these new faces would prove open to approaches that used criticism of the status quo to advance innovative arguments. The conflicts over civil rights, the women’s movement, and gay liberation made it clear that identity and attitudes toward difference mattered. In my dissertation and first book, my questions had been shaped by the mounting concern with social location and identity. To get at why some places had violent revolutions and others did not, I looked at the social identity of the individuals involved. Marxist-inspired historians had long maintained, following Karl Marx himself, that the French Revolution marked the triumph of bourgeois capitalism over aristocratic feudalism. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, Anglophone historians had shown that the leaders of the French Revolution at the national level had come not from the capitalist manufacturing class but from the ranks of lawyers and owners of minor judicial offices (judicial offices being bought and sold in France before 1789).

I decided to test the Marxist hypothesis on the local level by studying the men who held office in two manufacturing towns at the end of the Old Regime and comparing them with those who replaced them in 1789 and 1790. Textile manufacturers did play a more important role in the revolution on the local level, but hardly a decisive one, and I discovered something that intrigued me: those who embraced revolution in 1789 tended to be outsiders who were, nonetheless, not completely different from the insiders. True, there were some important social differences between them; the Old Regime elites were wealthier and better connected than those who replaced them, but their successors were close enough socially to aim to unseat them. Over time, and perhaps with the example of my mother in mind, I came to see that being

an outsider in this sense was really a cultural category that could take any manner of social forms.

To get a wider angle, for my next study I determined to look at the revolutionary activists in four major cities, one in the north and one in the south, one in the east and one in the west of France, this time over the entire revolutionary decade. In that pre-personal-computer age, I went around local archives with 4" x 6" index cards, recording occupations, tax records, addresses, club and masonic lodge memberships, and marriage contracts. The most challenging were the marriage contracts, which could be a couple of pages long or run to 20 or 30. Some notaries kept their records in loose alphabetical order, but paging through literally 200 years of dust to find the contract of one particular person could be daunting. Sinusitis became an occupational hazard. The payoff was the picture that slowly emerged, which helped me to solve the puzzle of why certain people became involved. I came to the conclusion that the revolution on the local level was propelled not by one social class or group but by a particular kind of outsider who could mediate between local and national concerns: immigrants (across local, not national, borders), Protestants, Jews, schoolteachers, actors, and merchants, too—that is, men who had ties to national networks of culture, power, religion, knowledge, or commerce.

Working with graduate students at the dawn of social science computing, I was able to test hypotheses about social identity in an even more quantitative way: by gathering every possible statistic on the regional level about voting patterns, adherence or resistance to revolutionary measures, demography, and economics. The graduate students were only allowed access to the Berkeley computer when the scientists had finished with their work, and they had to keypunch on thousands of cards all the data and the programs to analyze it. In the paper we did together on this question, we found that the Left was strongest in the periphery, where it is still strongest today in France, and the Right did well in more urbanized areas. It turned out that cities with large populations of frequently unemployed wage-workers and day laborers could become hotbeds of right-wing

republicanism, populist royalism, and Bonapartism. In short, the Marxist model of revolutionary workers and anti-aristocratic bourgeois merchants could not explain the complexities of local or national politics.

Even as I was gathering more data, I was looking in a different direction: away from social identity and toward political culture. First, that meant understanding the ways in which my relative outsiders could serve as culture and therefore power brokers and thereby collectively bring about a shift toward wider participation and a sense of belonging to a nation that itself exercised sovereignty. I became increasingly aware that this passage from a hierarchical, aristocratic society governed by a ruler who claimed divine right to one in which the people in some sense ruled themselves required much closer attention. The revolutionaries were trying to transform France almost literally overnight, and to do so they had to create a new language and culture of politics that relied heavily on visual symbols to engage a population that was only 50 percent literate. As a result, my studies of local revolutionary elites and regional political differences had to be combined with chapters on revolutionary symbols, festivals, and rituals. New people did not automatically produce a new political culture; in many ways, it was the emerging political culture that attracted new people. This is not to say that language or culture was the determining force: my metaphor was the Möbius strip, with political culture on one side and social groups on the other, but with no clear separation between them.

With the attention to political culture came an opening to fields usually left out in historical accounts, especially art and literature. The French Revolution let loose a flood of newspapers and pamphlets, which had long been staples of historical scholarship, but it also inspired a massive outpouring of commemorative portraits, scenes of events and battles, and caricatures of politicians and new social habits, either in the form of subscription engravings or cheaply fabricated etchings. These prints had long been overlooked as unworthy of serious analysis. My study of revolutionary symbols had revealed a divergence between the choice of a female or male figure; the symbol chosen for the

seal of the republic was a female allegory of liberty, but as the revolution radicalized, some proposed that it was more appropriate to represent the people by a version of a virile male, even a popular Hercules. I had documented this implicit contest but not really explored it.

In my next study, therefore, I examined what I called the “family romance” of the French Revolution: the working out of a new model for the body politic. If the nation had been represented by a quasi-divine father figure, who had now been executed as a traitor, what would take his place? A band of brothers, as the slogan Liberty, Equality, Fraternity suggested? What, then, was the role of women? Were they just symbols? To get at the largely unconscious forms of this set of tensions, I found it fruitful to consider the major paintings and popular novels of the period, as well as the evidence from prints. These showed, taken together, that there was great anxiety about the new roles for men and women; many of the popular novels featured orphans, as if the French were uncertain about what life was going to be like after the killing of the quasi-divine royal father. Pornography became unavoidable: Queen Marie Antoinette had been the focus of a scurrilous campaign in pamphlets and prints, which helped to bring her to the guillotine even though as a woman she had no official role in government. Then there was the question of the marquis de Sade. How could I not wonder why the ultimate expression of pornography as a Western genre had been articulated in France during the revolutionary decade? Just when psychoanalysis and, heaven forbid, psychohistory, were being categorically dismissed, I was finding Freud and especially the notion of the unconscious to be essential. The pornography was not just titillation; it was a kind of bizarre rumination on the meaning of social, and especially familial, relationships.

The transition to a more democratic society was not like sledding downhill; lurching into the future unleashed a torrent of worries and fears. Some of them were painfully explicit, such as the menace of invasion by counterrevolutionary armies, but others remained unspoken or barely articulated, and many of these were reenacted in the new genre that emerged during the French

Revolution: melodrama, in which thrilling action, scary music, and spectacular stage effects combined to terrorize patrons as a form of entertainment, and in this way, provided a kind of catharsis for the real-life Terror everyone had experienced in 1793–94. Running as a red thread through those productions was an obsession with parentage: what was individual identity and the role of the family in the new order, in which revolutionaries had explicitly limited paternal powers, instituted divorce on surprisingly modern terms, and even granted legitimacy to bastards? They had also, without drawing attention to it, eliminated sodomy from the penal code.

When I was finishing this study of the family romance, I was asked by my Western civilization textbook publisher if I would do a document collection on the French Revolution. On my mind was the question of women's rights—those that women gained and those that they did not get during the French Revolution. Women got the right to divorce on equal terms and equal inheritance rights; they did not get the right to vote. To make sense of the woman question, however, it seemed necessary to consider the other groups demanding and often getting rights: in the chronological order of their consideration, they were actors, executioners, Protestants, Jews, men without property, free blacks, and finally slaves, for the revolutionaries abolished slavery in 1794. Having brought together the documents on all these groups and translated and annotated them, I was prepared to tackle the subject in a book that included comparative discussion of rights in the new United States and Britain. Human rights are now the subject of fervent discussion in many fields; so little was this true for history in the 1990s that my document collection was cited in reviews of historical scholarship on the subject.<sup>2</sup> I would like to think that my 2007 book on the subject, *Inventing Human Rights*, helped ignite historical interest, though not because it persuaded everyone.

In that book, I pushed even further my cultural and psychological arguments. How could slaveowners and aristocrats, men like Thomas Jefferson and the marquis de Lafayette, come to believe that all men were created equal and endowed with

inalienable rights? Although it is undeniably crucial to understand why they limited rights, especially political rights, it is nonetheless remarkable how far the notion of rights could be pushed at the end of the eighteenth century; by 1794 the French had had to agree that actors, executioners, Protestants, Jews, free blacks, and slaves had the same rights as other French men. The notion of equality requires learning to empathize with people who are not like you. I emphasized the impact of new cultural practices—the rise of portraiture, listening to music in silence, insisting on personal space whether by building bedrooms or not sleeping three or four to a bed, and in particular, the sense of sacredness and inviolability of the individual body that made cruel punishments increasingly unacceptable—and especially new practices that encouraged cross-class and cross-race identification such as novel reading. I was struck by how people changed their minds so suddenly, for example, about brutal corporal punishment; about rights; and even, for some, about slavery and rights for women. Once a certain notion of rights takes hold, it can prompt questions no one ever envisioned.

This capacity for minds to change is precisely what I cherished about teaching. You do not get students to change their minds. You ask questions, provide materials for discussion, and somehow reading, discussing, thinking, writing, even your presence all magically combine—not to produce a given or predetermined outcome but often, in fact, an unexpected outcome. The difficulty has been to keep reproducing the conditions for that magic when students worry more about their futures and when public colleges and universities, especially, face financial constraints that lead to larger classes, fewer requirements, and just generally more haste all around. Still, for me, teaching has been a constant reminder that my life of learning is not just my life.

It is probably clear by now that I am an enthusiast—about the French Revolution, about new approaches, about teaching, and about history in general. For this reason I have often collaborated with others, including with students and younger colleagues, and devoted a fair amount of time to writing textbooks or guides

explaining new trends. It may be that my own specific sense of not fitting in made me just a bit more sympathetic to the difficulties students often face when reading history books or taking history courses. We scholars are experts in our fields but often less than expert at explaining the meaning of our knowledge or why anyone else should care. My own outsider status resonated with that of my historical subjects: I felt outside but not so much removed from the inside that I couldn't speak or, in my case, try to mediate between the two sides. In my work, therefore, I tended to push the envelope but not tear it to bits.

With those closest to me I have not had to worry about being an outsider. And with no one have I collaborated more frequently and more rewardingly than Margaret Jacob, an internationally renowned historian of Newtonianism, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution. Where I was a fanatic about France, she was a fanatic about archives. I have never seen anyone make more out of a trip to a new library or archive. Waiting for the delivery of an item, she would rummage through the card catalogs and call up something that caught her attention, if only for the vagueness of its description. Pathbreaking articles and even new doctoral dissertations were often the result. For 30 years now, she has been my constant companion in work and life, and the biggest reason why my life of learning is not one single life but is definitely a life worth living.

## NOTES

- 1 [www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2010/what-the-data-reveals-about-women-historians](http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/may-2010/what-the-data-reveals-about-women-historians) and <https://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/april-2002/the-status-of-women-and-minorities-in-the-history-profession>.
- 2 Kenneth Cmiel, "The Recent History of Human Rights." *The American Historical Review*, 109, no. 1 (2004), pp. 117–35.